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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 001795

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: PUBLIC REMAINS QUIETLY DISTURBED BY ANS CLOSURE;  
OPPOSITION EVICTION NEARLY FORGOTTEN

REF: A. BAKU 1752

- [1](#)B. BAKU 1739
- [1](#)C. BAKU 1729
- [1](#)D. BAKU 1713

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Two weeks after the November 24 closure of independent ANS Television and the eviction of the residents of the Azadliq newspaper building, the public, while concerned, remains quiet. After the President's November 29 comments on the ANS "suspension," many were optimistic that he would take concrete steps to allow ANS to rebroadcast. As days pass while ANS remains off the air, the President's words seem to be losing traction. After the President's statement, Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov came out with a cryptic statement defending Azerbaijani democracy, while opposition leaders counter that the country is shifting towards a more authoritarian regime. There are also many concerns that the media crackdown is damaging Azerbaijan's international image, and the country's relationship with the West. Rumors continue to circulate that the ruling party is pushing for an extension for the presidential term, but there is no clear connection indicating that this push is tied to the November 24 events. The eviction of the Popular Front Party, independent Turan News Agency, Azadliq newspaper, and Bizim Yol newspaper have been all but forgotten in the shadow of the ANS closure. END SUMMARY

REACTION TO ALIYEV'S STATEMENT ON ANS

[1](#)2. (C) Although the Azerbaijani population remains shocked over the November 24 closure of ANS, expressions of this concern are still largely muted (see ref c). Virtually all contacts with whom we talked agree with the public statements - made by politicians, national artists and athletes, and even the pro-GOAJ Ombudswoman - calling upon the President to allow ANS to broadcast again. The general public initially perceived President Aliyev's November 29 statement on ANS as a signal that the GOAJ would allow ANS to resume broadcasting. However, as days pass and ANS remains off the air, the President's words seem to be losing traction. The National Television and Radio Council's (NTRC) decision to allow ANS Television to participate in the tender for the station's frequency (see ref a) is not viewed as an adequate step to reverse the contentious decision to "suspend" the broadcast of ANS. Popular Front Party (PFP) Chair Ali Kerimli told us that he is concerned the GOAJ will "take control of ANS but present it as the same ANS." Human rights activist Saida Gojmanly echoed Kerimli's concern, saying that the tender process will allow the management of ANS to change, perhaps even hiring the same employees that already worked for ANS. Youth activist Emin Huseynov said that Aliyev's statement was "just an attempt to buy some time." In a December 6 meeting with DCM and PAO, Presidential Advisor for

Social and Political Affairs Ali Hasanov gave an informal assurance that if ANS participated in the tender, and if the ANS owner "showed appropriate respect" to the NTRC, it would win the tender. However, given the aggressive role that Hasanov has played in this crisis, it is not surprising that the ANS leadership is skeptical.

13. (C) Eldar Jahangirov, an active member of the independent Democratic Reforms Party (DRP) told us that the President's statement indicated he would not go out of his way to support ANS, preferring that it be handled in a "legal way." According to Jahangirov, people remain upset about the closure, regardless of the cause. In a November 30 editorial piece, independent - and recently evicted from the 33 Khagani location - Turan News Agency said that "Aliyev's statement does not clarify the ANS situation." Musavat party leader Isa Gambar told the press that the President's statement was "an attempt to conceal the real state of affairs." According to Gambar, the international community's "tough statements" have forced Aliyev to "be careful." Etibar Mammadov, chair of the Azerbaijan National Independence Party told the press that although Aliyev's statement is "very interesting" and that his proposals are important, he had concerns on how GOAJ officials would implement these proposals. Human rights activist Saida Gojamanly told us that the President's statement was intended to "deceive" the international community, that citing the legal basis for the November 24 events is really masking the GOAJ's flexing of power.

14. (SBU) The lack of significant public backlash to the closure of ANS may be due, in part, to ANS management's decision to deliberately dissuade supporters from taking strong action. All public comments made by ANS since the November 24 closure have been notably mild. ANS management told us that because they are "in a difficult position," they

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have urged the thousands of viewers who have called in to voice support not to react strongly. As political analyst Ilgar Mammadov told us, many people still cling to the hope that the President will somehow "fix" the situation.

#### AZERBAIJANI DEMOCRACY UP FOR DEBATE

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15. (U) In his November 29 statement, President Aliyev defended Azerbaijan's respect for democratic values, saying "Freedom of the press is present in Azerbaijan...and ensuring freedom of speech is one of our priorities." In an interview with BBC News, Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov commented on the United States' November 29 statement in response to the closure of ANS and the eviction of the Azadliq newspaper building tenants, calling the GOAJ to honor its commitment to democracy and freedom of the press. In the interview, Mammadyarov said that there were "no problems with free speech in Azerbaijan." He continued, saying "We already have the skeleton of what we understand as a democracy for the state. Now we need the muscles." Similar to the President's statement, Mammadyarov concluded that there would be "no untouchables;" that everyone had to operate under the rule of law (see ref b). Not everyone agrees with GOAJ officials defending Azerbaijan's status as a developing democracy. Popular Front Party Deputy Chair Fuad Mustafayev commented to the press that if the GOAJ "played at democracy before, now they even refuse to imitate it." Mustafayev echoed concerns that we have heard from other opposition leaders that Azerbaijan is shifting towards a more authoritarian regime like that of Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan.

#### IMPLICATIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

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16. (C) Across the board, contacts agreed that the media crackdown is damaging to Azerbaijan's relationship with the international community. Political analyst Ilgar Mammadov told Poloff that the November 24 events are a "major blow to

democracy" in Azerbaijan. He said that the media crackdown will have a serious negative impact on Azerbaijan's relationship with the West, which he feels is evidenced by criticism from the international organizations "on the highest level." Member of Parliament (MP) and Chair of DRP Asim Mollazade shared his frustration that GOAJ "bureaucrats are violating the national interests of Azerbaijan." According to Mollazade, the GOAJ's media crackdown is damaging to the country's relationship with the international community and is damaging Azerbaijan's international image. Mollazade concluded that actions like these serve to push Azerbaijan's orientation from west to east.

#### A LONGER PRESIDENTIAL TERM?

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¶17. (C) In the wake of the November 24 events, rumors of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) pursuing a longer presidential term continue to churn. In a November 8 newspaper column, one YAP member argued that prolonging the term would result in the President having more time to "manage his work effectively" and to "use his potential." Although most seem convinced that this may be more than just a rumor, it is unclear if the idea of a term extension is linked to the media crackdown. Political analyst Leyla Alieva told Poloff that the Azerbaijani people view a possible extension of the presidential term as "fully possible." She suggested that it would be difficult to determine whether this plan would materialize, but she believed that the idea could gain steam in the coming months. Head of the opposition Yeni Siyaset (Yes) bloc Eldar Namazov said that YAP is using the November column as a "trial balloon." Although Namazov is not certain from which level of the GOAJ this initiative has sprung, he said that this was not a random move. Namazov expects similar maneuvers in the coming months. Journalist Chingiz Sultansoy told us that the extension is possible, because with a weak opposition and a politically apathetic population, there would be little public backlash. Youth activist Emin Huseynov concluded that while an extension is possible, YAP will probably attempt to do this through a referendum to be held after the October 2008 Presidential Elections.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE OPPOSITION?

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¶18. (C) Although the eviction of the tenants of the 33 Khagani location (the former Azadliq newspaper building - see ref d) - enforced mere hours after ANS Television was taken off the air - certainly helped fuel initial reaction to the rapidly deteriorating media freedom situation, now that the dust has settled, 33 Khagani's former residents are all but forgotten.

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Many public statements following the November 24 events, both from international organizations and local players, focused on the rebroadcast of ANS. Further, most statements that mentioned the eviction focused on independent Turan News Agency and sometimes Azadliq newspaper, but overlooked the eviction of PFP, one of the first parties to emerge in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, and a major player in the country's independence movement. (NOTE: The Ambassador and PAO have raised the issue of PFP in repeated comments to the press.) PFP Chair Ali Kerimli shared his frustration with us, saying that although he whole-heartedly agreed with the Embassy's statement on ANS, Turan and Azadliq, he felt that the statement should have mentioned PFP as well. Kerimli also characterized the GOAJ's moves against the media and PFP as the opening salvo of a GOAJ move against "the multi-party system."

¶19. (C) Some blame the lack of public reaction to the 33 Khagani eviction on the absence of unbiased media coverage on the topic. With ANS off the air, several Azerbaijani youth told us that people simply do not have access to the information. Although the remaining network television

stations covered the eviction, these youth feel that they only covered the GOAJ's perspective. One of our contacts, who wrote a heated article on ANS' closure under a pen name, said that it is hard to tie the events together. According to this contact, while the closure of ANS "clearly has political motives," the 33 Khagani eviction does not. Echoing the thoughts of a good segment of the population, he said that the former tenants of 33 Khagani "can perfectly well operate in other offices, can't they? I don't understand the big fuss."

COMMENT

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110. (C) While many of our contacts bemoan the loss of ANS to Azerbaijan's media environment, public reaction to the suspension has been limited to rhetoric. We suspect many people generally believe that the GOAJ will indeed allow ANS to reopen in time - most likely with new management. The real GOAJ motivation behind the ANS closure remains unclear; we will provide our own analysis septel.

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